American Studies
with American Studies International

spiritualization and reaffirmation: what really happens when prophecy fails
Author(s): j. gordon melton
Source: *American Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (fall 1985), pp. 17-29
Published by: Mid-America American Studies Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40641958
Accessed: 20-03-2017 18:13 UTC

REFERENCES
Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:
http://www.jstor.org/stable/40641958?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents
You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
http://about.jstor.org/terms

Mid-America American Studies Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Studies*

This content downloaded from 150.135.135.69 on Mon, 20 Mar 2017 18:13:24 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

spiritualization and reaffirmation

what really happens when prophecy fails

j. gordon melton

> Sori Sori—there shall be greater winds and fires shall rage and floods shall be as raging torrents and they shall be as ones swept before them—give unto them this warning that they be prepared.
>
> While we are about it let it be known that there shall come no harm unto Mine Servants which obey Mine Will.
>
> Mrs. Keech, 1985

Characteristically, millennial religious groups possess a deep conviction of being in touch with cosmic history. Within that cosmic history they have attained a status as key individuals in the flow of human history. They view that history as either reaching its culmination or, at the very least, taking a decisive turn in the immediate future. Typically such groups may develop an apocalyptic worldview and see the world progressively disintegrating with no hope for salvation. As the elect and faithful remnant, they will survive and transcend the situation by being taken from it by a trans-historical force. In popular Protestant fundamentalism, Jesus will come to "rapture" his saints before the terrible battle of Armegeddon.

Within a scheme of cosmic history, millennialists are tempted to write future history as if it were in the past. Millennialists have frequently sketched pictures of the future course of human events based upon their understanding of the ultimate goals of universal forces. Within American

0026-3079/85/2602-0017$01.50/0

This content downloaded from 150.135.135.69 on Mon, 20 Mar 2017 18:13:24 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

millennialism such schemes have been constructed through the elaborate manipulation of Biblical chronology and have imposed upon history an element of numerical symmetry based upon the completion of thousand year cycles (thus the label millennial) or the repetition of previous eras of history.

Once a cosmic scheme is established, many millennial groups go further than merely predicting the future. They offer, as part of their claim to veracity, the accuracy with which they can have prior knowledge of particular future events. However, once groups commit themselves to a specific and definite prophecy, they run the risk that the prophecy will not come true. The failure of predicted events to occur within the expected timetable of the group creates a major problem, a problem threatening the very life of the group itself. How groups handle that problem illuminates some basic religious dynamics.

when prophecy fails

The fact that millennial groups hold a worldview quite at variance, at least on matters of eschatology, with that of their surrounding, dominant cultures, has made them one of several types of religious groups which have been of interest to social scientists and religious historians. Questions of how such a different and seemingly fragile belief system is created and sustained over a period of time, especially in the face of social antagonism and the events surrounding a disconfirmation of a prophecy, offer the possibility of providing a variety of new insights into human religious interaction.

This article examines one small aspect of the life of millennial groups, their response to the failure of prophecy. It derives from the examination of reports of numerous examples in the life of American religious groups (though the specific event may have occurred in another country), in which common patterns of adaptation to failed prophecy in groups with widely varying theologies were isolated. These patterns reported by observers in older groups are easily transposed into examples of behavior for which researchers might look in future research on similar groups.

The most famous study of the problem created by "failed" prophecy within a religious group, *When Prophecy Fails* by Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken and Stanley Schachter, examined various millennial groups throughout history and surveyed in depth one small millennial group, led by an individual identified only by the pseudonym Mrs. Keech, to see how behavior was affected by the non-occurrence of predicted events.[1] The study concluded that believers rarely followed the "logical" course of action when faced with the failure of a prophecy (i.e., to discard their belief system as inadequate). Instead, they attempted to reduce the dissonance created by the failure with intensified efforts at proselytization. The survey summarized their thinking, "If more people can be persuaded that the system of belief is correct, then clearly, it must, after all, be correct."[2]

The main thesis of the *Prophecy* study has retained strong support

This content downloaded from 150.135.135.69 on Mon, 20 Mar 2017 18:13:24 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

among social scientists, for some reason, despite the failure of several attempts over the last three decades by other scholars to replicate the study and thus confirm its findings.[3] They failed because of serious conceptual inadequacies in the study which infringe on the ability of its central theses to explain the behavior of millennial groups in the face of the non-occurrence of predicted events. For example, the thesis of the study hinges upon a number of errors in the historical section, not the least important being its assertion that after the Great Disappointment of 1844, William "Miller's followers gave up their beliefs and the movement quickly disintegrated in dissention, controversy and discord. By spring of 1845 it had virtually disappeared."[4] The several million present-day Millerites were not informed of this fact. The failure of other observers to replicate the finding of the study, coupled with errors in the reporting of the historical examples cited, also suggests that many of the phenomena observed may have been idiosyncratic to that group and peculiar to that moment in time, and therefore of little relevance in understanding millennial groups or the general failure of prophecy.

The more significant problems of the study derive from two basic conceptual errors. First, *Prophecy* approaches millennial groups from the position that "Typically, millennial or messianic movements are organized around the prediction of some future events." Such is rarely, if ever, the case. Millennial movements must possess a comprehensive thought world, such as fundamentalist Christianity or, as was the case with Mrs. Keech, the elaborate occult cosmology underlying belief in contact with extraterrestial superbeings. The movement must also develop a group life within which ritual can be performed and individual interaction occur. Though one or more prophecies may be important to a group, they will be set within a complex set of beliefs and interpersonal relationships. They may serve as one of several important sources determining group activity, but the prediction is only one support device for the group, not the essential rafter.

The belief that prophecy is the organizing or determining principle for millennial groups is common among media representatives, nonmillennial religious rivals and scholars. In their eagerness to isolate what they see as a decisive or interesting fact, they ignore or pay only passing attention to the larger belief structure of the group and the role that structure plays in the life of believers. Unfulfilled millennial expectations failed to invalidate Apostolic Christianity, which gradually reinterpreted the apocalyptic elements of its emerging theology; similarly, unrealized expectations failed to invalidate the faith of other groups.

Understanding that millennial groups are not organized around a single or single set of prophecies makes a significant difference in one's observation of them. If a prediction is the organizing principle of a group, its failure logically would be fatal to the group. But observation does not suggest that groups generally disintegrate after an error of prediction. If a prediction comes within a context of broad belief and group interaction, then its nonfulfillment provides a test for the system and for the personal

This content downloaded from 150.135.135.69 on Mon, 20 Mar 2017 18:13:24 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

ties previously built within the group. Times of testing tend to strengthen, not destroy, religious groups.

Second, the 1964 study, lacking a broad view of millennial groups, fails to understand that *within religious groups, prophecy seldom fails.* Within Christian groups, particularly, failure could be devastating since God's integrity is at issue. If the prophet's words do not come true, then the prophecy was not of God, and the prophet spoke falsely (Deut. 18:21-22). Religious groups, unlike the psychics in the weekly tabloids, are not in the prediction business. Instead of trying to score a high percentage of accuracy, they try to discern cosmic truths which they conceive in very tangible terms consistent with their perceived closeness to spiritual reality. For the "outsider" who does not share the total belief system and/or participate in the group life, the specific prophecy is often the only item of concern, but members perceive a broader perspective.

An outsider (or peripheral member) may view the failure of a major predicted event to occur as a sign of the obvious inadequacy of the group itself. However, the outsider had already decided that the group's worldview was wrong, which is why s/he is an outsider. The peripheral member who is still trying to decide upon the validity of the group's beliefs is still in the process of establishing strong social ties with other members. Among the committed believers, the failure of the prophecy to occur establishes a situation of disssonance, a situation in which the validity of the belief system which one has accepted is contradicted by the strong feelings of dejection and disappointment of the moment. The event challenges faith and threatens social ties within the group.

Confronted with an event that creates a high level of dissonance, one must dispel that dissonance. The nonbeliever, the person who has already concluded that the group's religion is personally inadequate, sees one logical course: abandon the group and its worldview. The believer, on the other hand, possesses a strong motivation to resolve the dissonance and so works with group members to provide various alternatives for bridging the gap between belief and reality.

In the face of dissonance, believers are able to rely upon the broader context of faith, on the unfalsifiable beliefs out of which religious thought-worlds are constructed. Within that context, believers can engage in a reaffirmation of basic faith and make a reappraisal of their predicament. For Christian bodies, such a reaffirmation may include focusing upon God's sovereignty and control of the course of history. At that moment obvious theological truths, such as human fallibility at understanding God's plan and revelation, can take on a new clarity. The non-occurrence of a predicted event provides a time to discover human limitation. Groups also search for means to reaffirm group life. They will gather for verbal affirmation and ritual activity. They may sing familiar hymns, exhort each other with admonitions to stand firm in the faith, and look to their leader(s) for guidance.

In a more satisfying but less heralded treatment of the problem than that provided in *When Prophecy Fails,* Joseph F. Zygmunt proposed three

This content downloaded from 150.135.135.69 on Mon, 20 Mar 2017 18:13:24 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

modes of adaptation, of reaffirmation and reappraisal, by groups after a prophetic failure.[5] First, groups may acknowledge an error of dating. Following the failure, they may designate a new date for the projected event or establish a new, but less definite, time frame, and then return to the mode of expectancy they enjoyed before the crisis event. Second, groups may shift the blame for the failure to some force, either within or outside the group, which has interfered with the cosmic timetable. As with the first instance, the group can then construct a new time frame for the prophesied events and return to a mood of expectancy.

Zygmunt, however, has taken the first steps in acknowledging the integration of the specific prophecies into the group's overall theology. Thus he poses a third alternative: that a group may, by reference to its broader theological worldview, deny the failure of the prophecy and assert its fulfillment, if not completely at least partially. Beginning from the point at which Zygmunt concluded his observations, it will be argued below that the denial of failure is not just another option, but the common mode of adaptation of millennial groups following the failure of a prophecy, and that the process of adaptation follows two common patterns which for convenience may be labeled cultural (spiritualization) and social (reaffirmation) responses.

cultural response

Whenever a prophecy fails, groups consistently engage in one activity—they reconceptualize the prophecy in such a way that the element of "failure," particularly the failure of the Divine to perform as promised, is removed. While a group may, temporarily, assume an error in timing, *the ultimate and more permanent reconceptualization is most frequently accomplished through a process of "spiritualization."* The prophesied event is reinterpreted in such a way that what was supposed to have been a visible, verifiable occurrence is seen to have been in reality an invisible, spiritual occurrence. The event occurred as predicted, only on a spiritual level. The process of spiritualization can be illustrated in the activity of a recept millennial group, the Universal Link.[6]

The Universal Link groups began with the visionary experiences of Richard Grave of Worthin, England. On April 11, 1961, while fixing up a newly rented house, he encountered "a bearded Christlike figure" who blocked his way. On this occasion the figure did not speak; he merely pointed to a framed picture of the Annunciation. The glass covering the picture exploded and fragments lodged in the image of the angel. The apparition then disappeared in a blaze of orange light. The picture which had been the object of the strange visitor's attention soon gained renown. Salty drops formed on its surface and people began to designate it "the Weeping Angel of Worthin."

The strange visitor returned to Grave on a number of subsequent occasions. He called himself "Truth," and told Grave of the imminent second coming of Christ in the wake of humanity's disastrous condition.

This content downloaded from 150.135.135.69 on Mon, 20 Mar 2017 18:13:24 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

Grave's story was picked up in a May 4, 1961 article in *Psychic News,* England's most widely circulated Spiritualist newspaper. Liebie Pugh, an artist in southern England, read of Grave and contacted him. During their meeting, Grave realized that, independently of him, Pugh had sculptured a representation of his visitor whom she called "Limitless Love."

Out of their convergence the Universal Link concept was forged. It welded together a number of individuals and groups who were being linked to the Highest and to each other as instruments of bringing in revelations of the cosmic operation which was ushering in the New Age. Universal Link groups formed around the world, as individual channels (mediums) of the cosmic message emerged. For them the period 1961-1967 became crucial. Truth told Grave, "No one can know the day nor the hour of MY COMING, or when the great Universal Revelation will be enacted; however by Christmas morning 1967, I will have revealed myself through the medium of nuclear evolution. This is MY PLAN which is absolute."

Thus Grave passed on to the Universal Link a specific prediction. While vague in some respects, those within the movement understood it as a plain statement that before December 25, 1967, an event visible to all involving some kind of atomic activity would occur. During the next six years members engaged in a zealous effort to spread the message and to tie together channels and groups around the world. Anthony Brooke, former ruler of Sarawak, aided the process greatly by touring Europe and America, lecturing and promoting the Universal Link cause. With Monica Parish, a close associate, he formed the Universal Foundation in England.

As December 1967 approached, a great expectancy grew within the movement. Members hoped and looked for an objective event, a spectacular occurrence which would signal the coming new age. No event resembling what anyone of them had imagined occurred. Thus by the morning of December 26 the situation of dissonance was firmly established.

Being scattered around Europe and the United States as they were, members could do little to provide direct support to each other. They put no noticeable increase of energy into proselytizing. However, attempts began almost immediately to deal with the dissonance. Typical of those faced with the non-appearance of the expected event, Nellie Cain of the Spiritual Research Society in Grand Rapids, Michigan reflected upon the disappointment:

> Many people who had read, or heard of the prophecy the Cosmic Being, "TRUTH" had given Richard Grave, that He would reveal Himself to the Universe through the medium of nuclear evolution, on or before Christmas morning, 1967, anticipated an outer, or physical manifestation. Of course they were disappointed, since they had given no thought beyond the *literal* meaning of the words, yet past experience concerning most prophecies indicates that one should ponder them deeply to extract the 'esoteric' or inner meaning.

A year later she observed:

This content downloaded from 150.135.135.69 on Mon, 20 Mar 2017 18:13:24 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

> There has been ample evidence during the past twelve month period of the great Cosmic outpouring of spiritual energies. As people feel the tremendous acceleration of these vibratory energies, they do not understand what is transpiring, and they are unable to adjust to the new frequencies. This is actually a very scientific process, which is unfolding. . . .

Having saved the prophecy, she went on to explain the atomic reaction that the world is undergoing:

> The atom has its balance of positive and negative charges working in complete and total harmony with each other, and when this balance is disturbed, as in the detonation of an atomic bomb, let us say, this creates an imbalance or a maladjustment of the subatomic and the atomic elements, or the ratio of positive and negative charges one to another, and consequently an explosion develops.[7]

Violet Barton seconded the statements of Nellie Cain. She reported that a vision of Christ framed in light had appeared to her around midnight on Christmas Eve.[8] Anthony Brooke reported his faith that Monica Parish, who had died a year prior to the prophesied day and whom he had begun to see as an extension of Liebie Pugh's "Limitless Love," was spreading her influence, and "Limitless Love" was appearing with ever greater frequency in the actions of and to the visions of more and more people.

Thus by spiritualization the members of the Universal Link were able to take the discomfiting experience—failure— and turn it into a cause for affirmation. By Christmas 1968 they could join with Nellie Cain in asserting, "A great Cosmic release is taking place in which the building of vibrational levels and frequencies is being developed in which the New Man will operate."[9]

The process observed in the Universal Link appears repeatedly in millennial movements. Typically, during a movement's first generation, a prophecy of a specific visible event is presented and integrated into the belief system of a group over a period that may range from a few weeks to a few years to many years (in one case, a century). The prophecy possesses a certain appeal because of its specific content, and potential converts recognize the risk incurred if they place their faith in the prophecy. It is falsifiable. When the moment predicted for the prophecy to be fulfilled passes, little doubt remains to either believer or nonbeliever of its occurrence, or non-occurrence.

The believer, however, does not react to the non-occurrence of the event by admitting failure. To do so would call into question the total experience of the group. Instead the believer begins a process of reinterpretation. The believer begins to see not that the prophecy was incorrect, but that the group merely misunderstood it in a material, earthly manner. Its truth came at a spiritual level, invisible except to the eye of faith. Thus from the original prophesied event, the believers create an "invisible," "spiritual" and, more importantly, unfalsifiable event.

This content downloaded from 150.135.135.69 on Mon, 20 Mar 2017 18:13:24 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

By doing so the group saves the prophecy from failure, retains its close connection with cosmic history and provides the condition under which its work can continue. Individuals, even thoughtful leaders, might depart, but the group survives. The payment for such a spiritualization of its prophecy is low, the mere admission of a slight error in perception, a readily acceptable human failure. The price is small compared with the loss of both face in the community and the intimate relationship with the cosmos implied in admitting that the prophecy might have failed. For the group, *prophecy does not fail*—it is merely misunderstood.

The examination of other millennial, adventist and prophetic movements throughout history reveals numerous examples of the attempt to spiritualize prophecies. The case of Joanna Southcott, an English prophet of the 1770s, provides a vivid example.[10] As visions began to appear before her, the young woman recorded them. After the publication of her message, followers gathered around her, convinced that she was a prophetess.

A crucial element in Southcott's message, the prediction of the imminent return of Christ, stirred many who flocked to her. As the peculiar revelation developed, she speculated on the crucial role of the "woman clothed with the sun" mentioned in the Book of Revelation (12:1). According to the Bible, this woman would bring forth a male child who would rule the nations with a rod of iron. Southcott identified the woman of Revelation 12 with the bride of the lamb (Rev. 19:7) and then accepted both roles for herself.

She attracted followers for over a decade and sealed them (confirmed them in their faith) with small pieces of paper she personally distributed. Then in 1814 she revealed the climatic word. She was to become the woman clothed with the sun in physical reality and bear a son who would be named Shiloh (Gen. 49:10). Though 64 years old, she began to show signs of pregnancy, and several doctors confirmed that she was indeed with child. With her followers preparing for a new virgin birth, Southcott was experiencing a false pregnancy. She failed to produce a baby, and after some months all the symptoms of pregnancy left. Within a few weeks of the departure of the symptoms, she weakened and died. Some of the followers left the movement, but not the majority.

George Turner, a former disciple of prophet Richard Brothers, arose to save Southcott's prophecy. Turner reaffirmed the reports of the doctors who had attended her; she had indeed been pregnant. Then returning to the source of her vision (Rev. 12), he reminded the believers that the child of the woman was to be taken up into heaven. Shiloh lives! He was taken into heaven directly from the womb. He will in due time reappear.

Thus Turner catalyzed the transition for the Southcottites by turning what was to be a visible, if miraculous, birth of a child into a cosmic event witnessed only in the empty womb of Joanna Southcott. He failed at one point, however, in that he proposed a new prophecy. He predicted Shiloh's return in 1820. The failure of the six-year-old Shiloh to return destroyed Turner's credibility and elevated John Wroe who effectively argued that

This content downloaded from 150.135.135.69 on Mon, 20 Mar 2017 18:13:24 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

Shiloh's return awaited an indefinite period of testing for God's people. Wroe's followers in the form of the Christian Israelites and the House of David are still presumably in that period of testing.[11]

social response

The failure of a predicted event to happen generally shocks believers to some extent. Disappointment is real, as is the threat to the group's survival. The non-occurrence of the expected event cannot be denied. Life cannot return immediately to the norm enjoyed prior to the non-event. Some means must be found to reaffirm the validity of the group and the truth of its beliefs. Some action must be taken to repair the social fabric torn in the prophecy's failure. At such moments groups tend to turn inward, as much as their environment will allow them, and engage in processes of group building.

The response by members of that most famous of American millennial movements, the Millerites, amply illustrates the process. Bible student William Miller projected the end of the world for October 1843, and twice revised the time to dates in 1844. The non-occurrence of Christ's return, known as the Great Disappointment, finally led Miller to tell his fellow believers, "I confess my error and acknowledge my disappointment." Miller took an extreme minority position. The majority of the estimated 50,000 Millerites were not ready to give up either their belief in the imminent second coming of Christ or the inside knowledge of the cosmic secrets that Miller's chronological speculations implied. Nevertheless Jesus had failed to appear as scheduled.

Some followers revised chronological schemes, including new projected dates for Christ's return; one such date was 1854.[12] As it and successive projected dates came and went, each proved a disappointment. After each disappointment, the number of believers who would accept a new date diminished.

Eventually the believers had to reach a more satisfactory solution to the dissonance created by the Great Disappointment. Some moved slowly to a position that the chronology was wrong but not far wrong. Jesus would return soon. They easily transformed that position into a general faith in the second coming at an unknown date. Thus later generations of Millerites could laud the first generation for recovering faith in the second coming while ignoring their date-setting errors.

The means to vindicate the Millerite claims, however, by spiritualizing Miller's prophecy, was discovered by Hiram Edson, the Adventist leader in Port Gibson, New York.[13] But his solution, which gradually was embraced by most Millerites, was found only in the process of the reaffirmation of the group and its beliefs. The Adventist group at Port Gibson gathered at their meeting place (Edson's barn) on October 22, 1844, to await in a prayerful atmosphere the expected return of Christ. They waited all day until the midnight hour signaled the end of the

This content downloaded from 150.135.135.69 on Mon, 20 Mar 2017 18:13:24 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

calendar day. At dawn on the 23rd some believers, stung by disappointment, departed for their homes.

Their departure induced Edson to reflect upon his joyful months as an Adventist. He called those remaining to prayer and led them in a cathartic vocalization of their confusion and disappointment. Their questioning soon turned to affirmation. God did hear their cries. His word was true and sure. They convinced each other that God would reveal the nature of their error and offer new leading. Immediately, however, they had to attend to the more important task before them—mending the group's wounds. The small band left the barn to visit and encourage the other Adventists with the affirmations that had resulted from their prayers. They left the meeting not to proselytize the public but to encourage their disappointed brothers and sisters.

The spiritualized reinterpretation of the prophetic event came to Edson while on his mission of mercy after the prayer meeting. He pondered one image used by Millerites to describe Christ's second coming: his role as high priest. At His coming, Christ would step out of the heavenly temple in which He had been ministering and greet His followers on earth. There, Edson found the mistake. Reading chapters eight through ten of the Book of Hebrews, he saw Christ as high priest following the pattern of the Day of Atonement. Christ did not leave the heavenly sanctuary on October 22, 1844; on that day He had just entered it.

> [I]nstead of our High Priest coming out of the Most Holy of the heavenly sanctuary to come to this earth on the tenth day of the seventh month, at the end of the 2300 days, he for the first time entered on that day the second apartment of that sanctuary and that he had a work to perform in the Most Holy before coming to this earth.[14]

As Adventist historian Leroy Edwin Froam observed, this new truth illuminated the whole question, clarified the disappointment and dispelled the confusion. It cut through the dissonance and eventually spread as a principle around which eschatological doctrine would be worked. Those who agreed with Edson became what are known today as the Seventh-Day Adventists. By spiritualizing, following Edson's teaching, they were able to keep their faith in Miller's chronology; in their minds, Miller's failed prophecy of 1844, the prophecy which had called them together, proved true. However, the reinterpretation of the prophecy worked in tandem with the activity of the group in reaffirming its faith and life.

A more recent example of the group building process was observed and recorded by Jane Allyn Hardyck and Marcia Braden in a study published in 1962 which aimed at testing the *Prophecy* hypothesis. The unnamed pentecostal group they studied was led by "Mrs. Shepard," who occasionally uttered prophecies believed to be from God. These were recorded and seemed to predict an imminent nuclear holocaust. The group responded. Fifty miles from an urban center which they believed would receive a direct hit with a nuclear bomb, they built fallout shelters, stocking them with food and supplies.

This content downloaded from 150.135.135.69 on Mon, 20 Mar 2017 18:13:24 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

The group believed, as a result of their study of the Bible, that one third of the earth would be killed in the war and that sickness would afflict the survivors. They as the remnant would be given miraculous powers of healing and would spearhead a worldwide evangelism campaign.

On July 4, approximately 135 people entered the shelters, which were linked via an intercom system. They stayed underground for 42 days. A few hours after emerging from the shelter the group gathered at its church building. Mrs. Shepard commenced the process of reaffirmation and reinterpretation immediately with the question, "Did you have victory?" The unison reply was, "Yes, praise the Lord!" She then addressed the group on how their stay had not weakened but had strengthened their faith and fellowship. Testimonies of the members confirmed their leader's initial reaffirming remarks.

Though observed by the press during the entire period from the construction of the shelters through the weeks after their emergence from them, the group showed no evidence of increased attempts to proselytize, putting their entire concentration instead on understanding their experience. They re-examined the recorded prophecies and discovered that no actual prediction of an imminent attack had been made. They had made an error of interpretation. They finally concluded that God had been testing their faith and using them to warn a world fallen asleep.[15]

conclusion

In this essay I have attempted to reevaluate one very popular thesis within the social sciences concerning the response of religious groups when faced with the failure of a predicted event to occur on schedule. That thesis, that in the face of the failure of prophecy, groups tend to reduce the experienced dissonance by increasing efforts at proselytization, has found no confirmation in subsequent studies and, in the case of Mrs. Keech's group, can best be explained as an idiosyncasy of Mrs. Keech intensified by the high level of attention focused upon the group in the local press. The reaction to the press, the bedrock of the claim of increased proselyting activity, is best understood in the context of the group's earlier attempts to gain the attention of the press, prior to the prophesied event. In the light of such failure to confirm the thesis over three decades, and our ability to understand all that Festinger, Riecken and Schachter observed without recourse to their thesis, I suggest that it be discarded, at least until some observable incidents replicating its finding appear.

I also suggested that the *Prophecy* study was weakened by a lack of appreciation of the manner in which beliefs and actions with a particular focus (in this case prophecy) are integrated as but a single gestalt, though an important one, into the total religious life of a group. Thus behavior which seems logical to an outside observer is not followed by group members who operate within a completely different intellectual and social reality. Future studies of groups experiencing a prophetic failure should look for the effects of the more comprehensive religious faith and life upon

This content downloaded from 150.135.135.69 on Mon, 20 Mar 2017 18:13:24 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

the group at each stage of its evolution. As scholars we should approach religious groups as phenomena to be observed and understood in their own complexity, with at least as much respect for the complexity and integrity of our subject matter as a biologist or physicist has for the phenomena of nature.

As an alternative, I proposed beginning with Zygmunt's suggestion that prophecies, which to outsiders appear to have failed, may not have failed for the millennial group as a whole, though individual members may go through varying levels of doubt after the predicted event fails to happen. The denial within the group of what to outside observers is obvious failure of a prophecy is accomplished through the two processes of spiritualization of the prophecy and reaffirmation of the group's faith and life, by reference to the larger context of group belief and experience: this reaction is not just one among many, but the most common mode of adaptation used by millenial groups. Thus failure is transformed into success and disappointment into an occasion for celebration. Both processes have been explained and illustrated, and while only four examples were cited here, numerous others can be found in the recent history of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Worldwide Church of God, the Children of God and other occult and Christian millennial bodies.

Finally, it should be noted that this article focused upon only *one* issue raised by failed prophecies: the common process by which prophetic failure is integrated into the total group experience. A host of issues concerning prophecy and prediction within religious groups await future consideration. For instance, millennial groups vary widely in their thoughtworlds and lifestyles. Some are tightly structured, communally organized, and separatist; others are the opposite. Some are small, informal and intimate while others are relatively large, well-organized and composed of members unacquainted with each other. Some are more successful than others both before and after the failed prophecy. (Mrs. Keech, now settled in Northern California, is still looked upon as a significant leader in the flying saucer contactee movement.) Some have a worldview largely adopted from their surrounding culture while others have assumed a completely alternative cosmology. Some theologies are more sophisticated (having integrated the wisdom of a religious community over a period of years) and elaborate (having dealt with a wider range of issues) than others, especially more recently developed theologies, and group leaders have a varying command of the resources available from their own religious tradition. Each of these factors, along with the individual tendencies in a charismatic leader, will affect the nature of a group's response to failed prophecy. Now, one hopes, knowledge of the processes of adaptation described above can serve as a beginning point for the examination of these additional factors, thus leading to a more complete understanding of the processes which determine millennial group behavior.

Institute for the Study of American Religion

This content downloaded from 150.135.135.69 on Mon, 20 Mar 2017 18:13:24 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

notes

1. (New York, 1964). The person known as Mrs. Keech was in fact a well-known figure in the UFO contactee community, and as the opening quote demonstrates is still an active group leader.

2. *Ibid.,* 28.

3. For example see: Jane Allyn Hardyck and Marcia Braden, "Prophecy Fails Again: A Report of a Failure to Replicate," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology,* 65 (1962), 136-41; and Robert W. Balch, Gwen Farnsworth and Sue Wilkins, "When the Bombs Drop," *Sociological Perspectives,* 26 (April, 1983), 137-158.

4. Festinger, Riecken and Schachter, 22-23.

5. "When Prophecies Fail," *American Behavior Scientist,* 16 (November-December, 1972), 245-67.

6. Cf. Brother Francis, *The Universal Link Concept* (Los Angeles, 1968) and Anthony Brook, "The Universal Link Revelation" (London, 1967).

7. Brother Francis, 22-24.

8. *Ibid.,* 29.

9. *Ibid.,* 23.

10. On the Southcott movement see G. R. Balleine, *Past Finding Out* (New York, 1956) or the more recent biography of Southcott by James K. Hopkins, *A Woman to Deliver Her People* (Austin, Texas, 1982).

11. It is interesting to note that the Interdenominational Order of Twin Falls, Idaho, relived this identical prophecy in the 1930s. They are currently awaiting the return of the child snatched from the womb of their leader Frances Sande. See *Reincarnation Presents the Christ Again* (Boulder, Colorado, 1960) and *"A Little Child Shall Lead Them"* (Twin Falls, Idaho, 1960).

12. The Christian Advent Church grew out of the believers in the 1854 date.

13. On the history of Adventism in general and Hiram Edson in particular see Leroy Edwin Froam, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* (Washington, D.C., 1954), 4 vols.

14. *Ibid.,* 881.

15. Hardyck and Braden, 138-9.

This content downloaded from 150.135.135.69 on Mon, 20 Mar 2017 18:13:24 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms